

In 1985 *Harper's* magazine launched a new feature, designed to take us into new topics not by narration, but by annotation. The magazine's authors analyzed documents for the story behind the words, offering observations and critique of why material was included, left out, or displayed as shown.

In higher education, we also have many documents familiar to students that include a much longer story behind the words. Let's take for example, the:

multiple choice exam

American universities have no universal rules regarding numbering of classes. Lower three-digit numbers traditionally indicate introductory classes. The famed "101" is so familiar that it's been adopted by all sorts of headline writers and advertisers: health care 101; basketball 101; rap music 101; hair care 101, etc. At NDSU, however, we can't use a number below 110 for a three-credit class, because those numbers are reserved for non-credit catch-up courses. This course used to be MCOM110; it was changed to 112 to avoid confusion with SPCM 110, the introductory speech course. It actually could have received any number from 110-199. Choice is somewhat arbitrary, perhaps even political; the state's common course numbering system now dictates simple COMM designations, making the difference between speech and mass comm classes even more confusing. Reduction of confusion for students, however, is not usually the first goal when course numbers are awarded.

This instructor (guess who) used to give two exams in this course, a midterm and a final. That's traditional for universities, but tends to base a student's grade on only two big tests. This instructor believes learning is better done in smaller doses, so one exam won't blow a whole semester's grade. Other instructors, however, believe students will study harder if they have fewer exams.

This wording is not random; it is carefully constructed to avoid using the term *right*, and it adds the word *available*. In a multiple choice exam, it is easy to argue that a particular choice isn't as good as some other choice not included in the answers. That is, you can say that the *right* answer isn't offered, so the question ought to be thrown out. However, it's much harder to dispute a question if you're asked simply to do the best you can with what's available.

Testing experts often advise test-preparers to begin with an easy question, both to help build confidence in the test-taker and to reduce test anxiety. This seemingly-intuitive question also was part of a previous class quiz, and was posted on the class Web discussion group as a possible question to be included on this exam. Nevertheless, 4 percent of the 75 students who took this test most recently got it wrong.

A simple fact-based question: either you know it or you guess. University education inevitably involves some memorization of facts, and many multiple-choice exams ask almost exclusively questions based on memorized words of the instructor or textbook. In fact, in some countries, memorization is learning, and students pore over textbooks and notes for hour upon hour trying to cram in every single word. Do they do well on fact-based exams? Of course. Do they do as well in applying this memorized knowledge to their eventual jobs and lives? That's a less certain question, and many educators in the United States believe such multiple choice tests really say nothing about a student's true knowledge and understanding of the material. It might be one reason American students taking traditional, fact-based, exams, seem to compare so poorly with their counterparts overseas.

**COMM 112, Understanding Media
Exam One**

Select the best available answer from the choices below, and fill in the corresponding space on the accompanying computer sheet **in pencil**. There is no penalty for guessing. Be sure to put your name on the sheet, **last name first!** Under "Identification Number," enter any number up to 10 digits that you can use to identify your score when grades are posted.

1. Mass media usually are sources of
 - a. news.
 - b. entertainment.
 - c. persuasion.
 - d. social cohesion.
 - e. All of these.
2. In the United States, broadcasting's programming emphasis has been mostly
 - a. informational.
 - b. public affairs.
 - c. educational.
 - d. entertainment.
 - e. socialistic.
3. You're the news director of KRAP-TV in Hoople, N.D. A story arrives by wire saying the lieutenant governor of Missouri is hospitalized in good condition after falling in his bathtub. You
 - a. probably would air the story due to the news value of consequence.
 - b. probably would air the story due to the news value of conflict.
 - c. probably would air the story due to the news value of proximity.
 - d. probably would not air the story due to the news value of proximity.
 - e. probably would not air the story due to the news value of timeliness.
4. "Let's be just like 'Entertainment Tonight,'" your reporter says. "We'll get a pile of viewers." But as news director you don't know if you wish to base your entire news operation on the news value of
 - a. proximity.

Students commonly wonder why they are not just asked to put in their student number, at NDSU called the NAID number. The federal data privacy act prohibits this, because the NAID number could be used to access a student's files. So in fact if you were to find out someone else's number, you could, say, call up NDSU's ALFI registration system and find out a variety of things about another student, if you also somehow got hold of the password. For similar reasons of privacy, you can't be asked to use your social security number. Far-fetched? You'd be surprised at what some people will go through to assume someone else's identity and create all sorts of mischief.

An alternative to the fact-based question above. A big criticism of traditional multiple choice exams is that they don't measure practical applications of classroom knowledge. Ideally, instructors ought to ask primarily questions which go beyond mere memorization of facts, to ask students to apply, analyze and synthesize their knowledge. Many American university instructors have been influenced by this new approach to measuring higher-level knowledge, as explained by classroom assessment guru Thomas A. Angelo. This question reflects the approach, by asking students to apply basic knowledge of journalism news values to an actual situation not discussed in class.